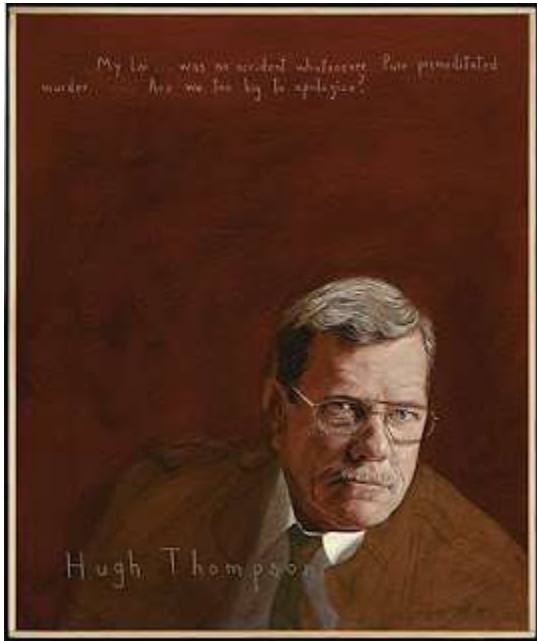


## Real American Hero's: Hugh Thompson

"Support Our Troops," "Freedom fighters," "Heroes," "Patriots." Sound familiar? We hear these words and phrases. Some people see such language as patriotic; others see it as jingoism and war propaganda.



In Winter Soldier II, many soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan discussed acts and policies that, at first hearing, sound decidedly unheroic and unpatriotic. Some people would call these soldiers "traitors" and others would call them "heroes".

So what is a real American hero? This article will examine that question and I hope you will respond with your own ideas about who are the "heroes" "patriots" and, yes, "traitors."

one real American hero received death threats and was reviled by many when he came home from his tour in Vietnam. He was attacked and threatened by fellow soldiers and even a member of congress. Sounds like he must have committed some kind of atrocity, right? Read

on and you will learn the story of Hugh Thompson, helicopter pilot.

Thompson was born in Atlanta in 1943 and grew up near Stone Mountain, Georgia. After a short stint in



college he served first in the navy in a Seabee construction unit and then in 1966 he joined the Army and trained to fly helicopters. Warrant officer Thompson, known as an aggressive and exceptional pilot, flew a scout helicopter in Vietnam in 1968. This meant that he and his crew flew treetop level or below to draw fire from the enemy. Larry Colburn, Thompson's gunner, described this technique as, "We were basically bait. 'Please shoot at me so we can get the gunships or artillery on you.' "

On March 16th, 1968 events conspired to put the 24 year old Thompson and his helicopter crew in the middle of a massacre of civilians from the Village of My Lai. The US was fighting a guerilla war in Vietnam where anyone could be the enemy or one of their supporters. The Vietcong, with support of the local population, controlled the nights, and American GIs who survived the nights controlled the battlefield by day. Charlie Company (Task Force Barker, 11th Brigade, Americal Division), known in the field by fellow soldiers as the "Butcher Brigade", had recently watched 28 of their buddies killed by an unseen enemy. Every casualty was from booby traps, snipers and mines. The last booby trap killed a popular sergeant. Charlie Company was ordered into an area which included the village of My Lai, known as a North Vietnamese stronghold. Their officers, including Lieutenant William Calley, told them "This is what you've been waiting for -- search and destroy -- and you've got it."

As Thompson and his crew approached the village they began to see large numbers of civilians heading slowly down the road from My Lai on their weekly trek to the Saturday Morning market. Thompson reported, "The first thing we saw was a draft-age male running south out of the village with a weapon and I told him ( the gunner) to get him. He tried, but he was a new gunner -- he missed him. That was the only enemy person I saw that whole day."

He then described the next events: "It didn't take very long until we started noticing the large number of bodies everywhere. Everywhere we'd look, we'd see bodies. These were infants, two-, three-, four-, five-year-olds, women, very old men, no draft-age people whatsoever."

But Thompson and his crew could not bring themselves to believe that their fellow soldiers were killing these civilians. They hypothesized that an artillery strike had hit the villagers. Then they saw movement among the victims and got on the radio and marked them with smoke for rescue. A few minutes later they watched from the air as an American captain walked up to one of the wounded they had just marked for rescue. He took out his gun and "blew her away". Charlie Company shot every wounded villager they had marked for rescue.

Sometime later they saw unharmed civilians, an old man, women and children described by Colburn as "little kids with Prince Valiant haircuts, black bangs, black pajamas and sandals," huddled by a bunker. Thompson made a decision and landed his helicopter between the advancing American GIs and the civilians. He approached the ground units and asked, "Can you get them out?" They said, "Well, we're gonna get them out with a hand grenade." He said, "Just hold your people right here please, I think I can do better." Thompson ordered his crew to shoot if the squad attacked the civilians. Colburn describes this delicate situation as a shouting match that appeared to be escalating towards a fight between Thompson and Charlie Company Lt. Brooks. " Glenn (the crew chief) and I looked at each other. We looked at the GIs we were supposed to protect, we looked at Thompson. A million things were going through my mind. The first thing, I wanted no one to think I was going to raise an M60 machine gun and draw on them. Or they'd draw on us. I remember pointing my muzzle straight at the ground so there'd be no mistake. We had a little stare-down but I caught one guy's eye and I kinda waved, thinking, hey, fellow American, and he waved back. "

Thompson coaxed the civilians out of the bunker, keeping his body between them and Lt. Brooks, and brought them over to his helicopter. He then got on the radio with the gunship that was piloted by his buddy and asked them to shuttle the civilians to safety. It was unheard of to use a gunship for Medivac but they did it that day twice to get all the Vietnamese to safety behind the lines.

On their way out of the village they again saw movement among the bodies in the ditch. They landed and Glenn, the crew chief brought a small child out of the ditch and handed him up to Colburn who said, "The child sat on my lap, limp. He had that blank thousand-yard stare. I couldn't even make him blink. He was in severe shock. He had no broken bones, no bullet holes, but he was completely drenched in blood. When Glenn picked him up, he was still clinging to his dead mother." They delivered the child to Quang Ngai hospital, an orphanage. They assumed at the time that he was only 4 or 5, but when they met him again in 2001 they found he had been 8 years old and, after staying at the hospital for 2 days, he left and went back to the village, 10 miles through the jungle, to make sure his parents were properly buried.



Thompson briefed his commanding officers on his experiences and heard no more from them until Seymour Hersh broke the story of My Lai two years later. At that point Thompson testified to the Senate, the Department of Defense and for all the court-martials. Back in Vietnam shortly after My Lai, reports of murder and mistreatment of Vietnamese civilians passed across the desk of an Army Major in Thompson's unit named Colin Powell. His investigation of these charges that included a detailed letter about the My Lai incident, reported that "relations between American soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent." Powell went on to become a 4 star general, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs under Bush and Clinton and held high public office in the Nixon and Bush administrations. He was involved in more cover-ups in Iran Contra and the lead up to the war in Iraq.

The photo shows Thompson, Colburn, Do Hoa, the boy they rescued from the ditch and Colburn's son Conner during a visit to Vietnam in 2001.

After My Lai, Hugh Thompson flew the remainder of his Vietnam tour as a scout without gunship cover. He was hit by enemy fire eight times and shot down four times. The last crash left him with a back injury that ended his duty in Vietnam. After recovering he trained helicopter pilots in the States. He eventually received a commission and retired from the military in 1983.

Thompson waited through 30 years of abuse from fellow soldiers and the public for recognition for his courageous stand. In 1998 He accepted the Soldier's Medal with tears in his eyes "for all the men who served their country with honor on the battlefields of South-East Asia." Professor David Egan at Clemson University, who had served a French village during World War II where Nazi troops killed hundreds of civilians, led the campaign to get Thompson recognition. Thompson, who died of cancer in 2006, lectured on battlefield ethics at West Point and other military academies during the last years of his life. He and His crew's actions became an example used in military manuals in both the US and Europe. West Point Dean Col. Tom Kolditz described his impact: "There are so many people today walking around alive because of him, not only in Vietnam, but people who kept their units under control under other circumstances because they had heard his story. We may never know just how many lives he saved." When asked what he told the Military Officer Cadets, Thompson said he just told them to "Be a soldier".

So, Thompson is a real American hero in many people's eyes. But, what about the men in Charlie Company? What does this story make of them? Certainly their immediate leadership appeared weak and even encouraged the atrocities that occurred. We know little of the actions of the senior officers. Evidence against them during the court-martial of their subordinates was contradictory or missing. Perhaps it too got lost on the desk of Major Colin Powell.

Colburn, the gunner on Thompson's helicopter in My Lai, gives his perspective on life in combat: "Only 10 percent of men who go to war actually feel the sting. Most men are in support. Other combat veterans know exactly what I mean. Unless you saw it, smelled it, lived it, you're not capable of understanding." He describes his own experiences in combat including some he regrets. Some of the men in Charlie Company refused orders and did not participate in the massacre, risking courts-martial

for refusing to obey orders. One veteran from Charlie Company, Varnado Simpson, talked after the massacre about how once you start killing, it just got easier and easier, the training just kicks in. He was overcome with remorse and eventually committed suicide. None of the Company, even those who did not participate, came forward to report the crime during their tour. But remember they continued to serve in the field, depending for their lives on their fellow soldiers in Charlie Company. Colburn explains, "They didn't get to fly into the sunset and sleep in a bed. They had to spend the nights out there when the VC came alive, and had to go on night mission and set up ambushes. I don't know if I could have made it a year in the field."

So who are the heroes now? And who are the traitors?